



ORIGIN AND CONGLOMERATION BACKWARD CLASSES IN TAMIL REGION

Dr. R. Thangamani

Associate Professor of History and Head
Pachaiyappa's College , Chennai.



ABSTRACT

When the British occupied the South India and formed Madras Presidency, the Tamil region came under their control. Madras was the headquarters of the British administrators. When the British rule was firmly established, they felt the need of the educated Indians to run the administration. As the Brahmins were the traditional elite class, they fulfilled the needs of the British Administrators, serving in various administrative posts of the British Government in the Madras Presidency including the Tamil region. The elite Brahmins even surpassed the ability of the British administrators and spearheaded the National Movement of the Indians. The rise of the Brahmins was considered a real threat to the continuance of the British rule in Madras Presidency. Hence the British civil servants exposed the preponderance of the Brahmins in the public, judicial, educational and administrative fields in Madras Presidency. Even though the Brahmins were the microscopic minority people, they influence the macroscopic majority population. The statistical data provided by the British civil servants paved the way for the birth of the Non-Brahmin Movement and the dawn of the Justice Party in 1917. When the Non-Brahmin Justice party was dominated by the caste –Hindus, the backward non-Brahmins began to fight for reservation to the backward non-Brahmins in public recruitments. These events coincided with origin and conglomeration of the Backward Classes in Tamil Region.

KEYWORDS: Depressed Classes, Backward Classes, M.C.Rajah, British, Viswa Brahmins, Justice Party, Ootacamund, Government, G.O., Manickavelu Nayakar, Vanniyars, Madras Presidency, Madras Legislative Council.

INTRODUCTION

The stalwarts of the Justice Party made slogan that the motto of the Justice Party is 'equal opportunities for all and injustice to none'.¹ But the beneficiaries of the non-Brahmin movement were mostly the 'forward' non-Brahmins. Their ascendancy began in the 1920s and reached its zenith in the 1950s.² As a matter of fact, backward class movements were organized by two broad strata of non-beneficiaries, namely, the depressed classes and backward Hindus, for many opportunities from the government side.

DEPRESSED CLASSES

The Depressed Classes otherwise called 'Untouchables',³ made their demands soon after the Justice ministry assumed office. The ten nominated members raised their demands through questions

and resolutions passed in different forms in the Madras Legislative Council.⁴ They demanded representation in the public services, appointment of posts like peons, duffadars, and dalayaris and more facilities for the employment of Depressed Classes. Responding to some of these, the government offered small concessions to the Depressed Classes.⁵

In 1923 M. C. Rajah, a well-known Depressed Class leader in Madras, led a deputation to the Governor. The deputation team accused the Justice Party of not doing justice to Depressed Classes in nominations to the legislature and local bodies, and appointments to the services.⁶ M.C. Rajah accused that Justice Party arrested their progress and crushed their hopes and aspirations. Expressing that the Depressed Classes were anxious to share in the benefits of education, he urged for compulsory elementary education with provision for a noon-meal, a compensatory allowance to parents who lost the services of wage-earning children, an adequate number of scholarships, liberal fee concessions schools and colleges, and free hostels to the Depressed Classes. He expressed that the Depressed Classes people had been hewers of wood and drawers of water for the welfare of the caste-Hindus. He insisted for at least 30 per cent reservation to the Depressed Classes in the services. On behalf of the Adi-Dravida Mahajana Sabha in late 1924, he placed demands to the Governor. These demands were an adequate representation in the legislature, representation by election, inclusion of a Depressed Class member in the cabinet and Executive Council, and creation of a welfare department to the Depressed Classes.⁷

The Congress Party boycotted the Simon Commission in 1928 because no Indian was included in it. It was a blessing in disguise for Depressed Class Leaders. Through a memorandum, the Adi-Dravida Mahajana Sabha demanded separate electorates for the Depressed Classes. The Sabha members argued that joint electorates were worse than even nominations, as Depressed Class candidates elected by caste-Hindus would not take interest for Depressed Classes. A provincial conference of the Madras Depressed Classes Federation and a series of other conferences expressed identity with its common demands. When the Simon Commission's Report was rejected by the major contenders, and efforts were on to break the deadlock, many Depressed Class leaders pleaded to British against transferring power and implored that a Congress Raj would suppress the Depressed Classes.⁸

The term 'Scheduled Castes' was first coined by the Simon Commission.⁹ Due to the Government of India Act of 1935 in Madras the Depressed Classes were popularly known as Scheduled Castes.¹⁰ They were allotted 30 of the 215 seats in the legislature.¹¹ Though in 1934 the government reserved for Depressed Classes exclusively the one appointment earmarked for 'others' under the Communal G.O,¹² their long-standing demand for adequate representation was still a distant dream. Through repeated several questions, and resolutions, they continuously demanded more jobs, particularly in district and village administrations, appointment of a member to the Public Service Commission, the amendment of the Communal G.O. to provide more appointments to Depressed Classes.¹³

During the fourth decade of the Twentieth Century, the British Government received many petitions with requests for the allocation of three out of every twelve appointments for Depressed Classes, restoration of the original 'Communal Award' in place of the Poona pact,¹⁴ more representation in the services, reservation of all posts of attenders, peons, sweepers, etc. for the Depressed Classes, and increasing reservation for the Depressed Classes by 50 per cent. Responding to 1938 and 193 petitions on the low representation of Depressed Classes, the Government ordered the recruitment of Depressed Classes to the Madras Inferior Service, and to the posts of constables, compositors and attenders. Its most important action was the revision of the Communal GO in November 1947 which provided the Depressed Classes two (14.3 per cent) out of 14 appointments against the earlier one (8.3 per cent) out of 12.¹⁵

BACKWARD HINDUS

The backward Hindus also played a major role in the identity politics. Their dissatisfaction surfaced soon after the Justice Party came to power. In 1923 a no-confidence motion was brought against the Justice Party but it was defeated.¹⁶ It showed the unsatisfactory working of the Communal G.O. Hence the backward Hindus began to put in their pressure.

The Viswa Brahmins began to put in their pressure through questions and resolutions in the Legislative Council. They demanded their recognition as a Depressed Class. A 1932 resolution by Pandit Ganala Ramamurti and 27 other Members of the Legislative Council for inclusion of Viswa Brahmins in the Depressed Class list. It induced protests from some individuals and associations while support from the Viswakarma Young Men's Literary Association, and eight other representations with 1903 signatures. There were similar resolutions in 1933. The government declared all as iniquitous.

When their efforts to get included in the DC list failed, the MLCs of artisan castes changed their method. A resolution was passed in 1934 by Ramamurti and 23 others. It was for preferential treatment of Viswa Brahmins along with Vanniyakula Kshatriyas (Vanniyars), Setti Balijas, Chaklis, Devangis, Nadars, Nambudiri Brahmins, and other 'backward' communities. Subsequently many such resolutions were passed in 1935 and 1936. These resolutions demanded that appointments to public services-a higher age limit to appear for service commission examinations and to join the services, and in educational facilities.¹⁷

Meanwhile, the Vanniyars began to organized themselves. In 1935, S. A. Nanjappa claimed that though Vanniyars numbered over 30 lakhs (about 6.3 per cent of the Madras Presidency population), their representation was very low. He even reminded that he had earlier brought this to the Chief Minister's attention and sent a deputation to him but there was no response. He appealed the allocation of a share of every twelve appointments to the backward Hindus. In the legislative debates of 1936 he implored for separate representation for the Vanniyars.

Through a memorial of July 1938, the Vanniyakula Kshatriya Maha Sangam of Madras represented the Chief Minister that Vanniyars were very backward in education and employment. Even though there were more than 200 graduates, they had only six of the 1713 gazetted officers. The Vanniyars' main demands were for their recognition as a separate community, relaxation of the age limit for entry into the services, and preference in appointments to local bodies. The memorial also appealed that the Chief Minister give its deputation a hearing.

When its demands were not responded, the Sangam in September 1938 made a stronger representation to the Chief Minister insisting its necessities. The Sangam hoped that the Congress Government would provide every opportunity for the uplift of the backward communities in the administrative departments of the Government. It viewed that the term 'non-Brahmin' is a loose and mischievous one and it is used by politicians to suit their needs. It is not the birth-right of certain communities to get preference in the services. and again urged the grant of an early interview. This letter had some effect. The interview was granted a month later with an assurance that the Sangam's request for relaxation of age limit would be considered.

During November 1938 the Sangam again appealed the Chief Minister to consider its demands. It viewed that the relaxation of age limit would not help them in a big way. At a public meeting held in Madras in the same month, the Sangam place its demand for the granting of separate turns for the Vanniyars in the Communal GO, or at least one out of the five turns allotted to non-Brahmin Hindus. In a conference of February 1939 held at Kumbakonam, over 1000 persons from different parts of the Madras Presidency participated. It requested the Government for the fulfillment of the demands of the Sangam. In the Sangam's golden jubilee conference held in May 1940, the same appeal was reiterated. According to this conference, backward Hindus received better treatment under the British rule than under the Justice oligarchy. The Justice Party was mindful of only the interests of forward

non-Brahmins. Out of the 608 non-Brahmin Hindu gazetted officers only 13 were backward Hindus. The condition of the backward Hindu in the Madras Legislature and local bodies was not better in any way. Hence the backward Hindus opted to organize the backward classes league and show their solidarity move.¹⁸

BACKWARD CLASSES LEAGUE

At a meeting in 1932, efforts were initiated to form the Madras Provincial Backward Classes League. It was represented by the leaders like M. A. Manickavelu Nayakar, S. A. Nanjappa, P. K. Ramachandra Padayachi, H. Ari Gowder and others.¹⁹ As a non-political organization, the League was registered in 1935. It vowed itself to commit for the socio-economic and educational advancement of backward Hindus. It appealed all the members of the communities listed as backward under the Madras Educational Rules to join in the League.

In November 1933, C. Basudev led a deputation to the Revenue Member of the Executive Council. He openly addressed that the appointments reserved for non-Brahmin Hindus all went to a few forward communities, and urging separate representation for backward Hindus. This deputation was most likely the earliest efforts of the Madras Back Class League. In the Madras Legislative Council of 1934, Basudev, Manickavelu Nayakar, and other MLCs representing the backward Hindu communities, insisted the same view. They opted for the classification of these communities as the sixth group or backward group. It wanted to treat the remaining non-Brahmin Hindus and Brahmins as a non-backward group. It urged giving preferential treatment to backward Hindus in the place of forward non-Brahmin Hindus.

Due to the placement of a resolution n 134 by Manickavelu Nayakar for adoption of a 'Hindu backward class', the government began to examine the matter in detail. It realized that the Communal G.O. was not giving protection to those who necessarily wanted it. But it confused in identifying the real needed communities. The Government determined not to take the issue until it received a proper list. It also realized that any change in the prevailing G.O. would create new grievances and new demands. Hence it was not attempting for any remedies. It also decided to oppose all demands for change in the communal G.O.

The sudden stand of the Government, did not deter the backward class members of the Madras Legislative Council. In a 1935 legislative debate for revising the G.O, Basudev addressed that for nearly half the population the existing G.O. had no meaning and offered totally no advantage, Manickavelu Nayakar blamed that the prevailing G.O. is doing communal injustice to the major portion of the population. In the face of a rising tirade against the G.O., and cry for separate representation, the Madras Premier, C. Rajagopalachari expressed his alarm. He viewed thus: "It is very tragic that these places in the Government service still occupy the most important part in our consideration of public affairs. It is tragic ... because it shows how poor our country is. It shows there are no industries. It shows that we are not getting on very well as a nation and that is why we are quarreling over these Government and local body jobs as the most important thing in the world and raising it to the dignified level of a communal problem." Further he ventilated his thus: "It is wrong to allow this communal talk to become the daily subject and daily problem in this House. There is nothing else referred to here by people except this question of communities. Is it good for us? Yet, it is an original sin. It sticks. Let us get out of it. Let us try to reduce the virulence of this original sin. Let us try to make it less and less and not more and more".²⁰

On behalf of the Madras Backward Classes League, the *Backward Classes Journal* was started. It became the mouthpiece of the backward Hindus. The Madras Backward Classes League began to conduct regular conferences annually. Its first conference was held in Madras in 1939. It was attended by delegates and leaders of backward Hindu communities from the different parts of the Madras

Presidency. Its second conference was held at Ootacamund in 1940 and it was chaired by the Maharani of Vizianagaram, and inaugurated by the Maharaja of Pithapuram. It was attended by nearly 20,000 delegates. Proceedings of each conference were dispatched to the Government, and published in the *Backward Classes Journal*. The fifth conference was conducted at Ootacamund in 1943. It was witnessed with a massive rally of about 7,000 scouts. In his presidential address, M. Giriappa expressed that the Congress leaders were not in sympathy with the aspirations of the backward classes, that the Justice Party was practically invalid, and that Ramaswami Naicker, founder of the Self-Respect League, who had the rare opportunity of bringing about social reconstruction in South India, had drifted into politics and allowed himself to be under the influence of the Justice Party, and was neither here nor there. At last, he warned the backward Hindus to work for their liberation independently and organize themselves into a strong national party. The resolutions of this conference covered reservation of seats in the central and state legislature and local bodies for backward Hindus of the Madras Presidency in proportion to their population and separate representation.²¹

Following the constant appeals and representations by the Madras Backward Class the League, other associations, and the Depressed Classes, the government revised the Communal G.O. in November 1947. In a unit of 14 appointments, the revised GO allocated six (42.9 per cent) to forward non-Brahmin Hindus, two (14.3 per cent) each to backward Hindus, Brahmins, and Depressed Classes, and one (7.1 per cent) each to Anglo-Indians/Christians, and Muslims.²²

To conclude, the Backward Class Movement in the Madras Presidency was coincided with the Non-Brahmin Movement. The non-Brahmin movement represented a significant reorientation of castes and communities.²³ Most of the non-Brahmin communities emerged under the guise of the Backward Classes. When the Justice Party came to power, there arose conflict among the Backward Classes. It divided into two broad categories, namely, the Forward non-Brahmins and the Backward non-Brahmins. The Forward Non-Brahmins dominated the Justice Ministry and they became arm-chair politicians. The dissatisfied backward non-Brahmins began to come out of the Justice party. When the Justice Party declined in 1937, the backward non-Brahmins began to rise and started backward class movement in one form or another. As the Forward non-Brahmins imitated the style of the Brahmins and constituted a minority population they could not stem the rise of the Backward Class Movement since 1940s.

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Dr. R. Thangamani

Associate Professor of History and Head Pachaiyappa's College , Chennai.